

Between Conflict and the Classroom: Teacher Precarity, Instability, and the ETA's Role in Ethiopian Education

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Abstract

Background: Ethiopia's education system presents a profound paradox: despite two decades of expanded access, quality has catastrophically declined with over 95% of students failing Grade 12 national examinations and more than nine million children out of school. Political instability and teacher economic precarity have emerged as primary drivers of this crisis. **Purpose:** This article examines the nexus between political instability and teacher economic precarity in undermining educational quality in Ethiopia, and investigates the role of the Ethiopian Teachers' Association (ETA) in responding to these challenges. **Methods:** Employing qualitative document analysis of ministry reports, union publications, peer-reviewed research, humanitarian agency data, and Ethiopian media coverage, this study adopts a case study approach focusing on conflict-affected regions including Tigray, Amhara, Oromia, and newly established administrative areas. **Findings:** Armed conflict has devastated educational infrastructure with over 9,000 schools damaged and 7.2 million children out of school, 70% directly attributable to conflict. Teacher economic precarity has reached crisis levels: 91% of teachers intend to leave the profession, 96% received no recent professional training, and educators in newly established regions face salary delays with some receiving as little as 15% of regular pay. The ETA has responded through multidimensional advocacy including the "Go Public! Fund Education" campaign, Safe Schools Declaration promotion, ILO Convention 190 ratification advocacy, and engagement in national dialogue. **Conclusion:** Political instability and teacher precarity are mutually reinforcing crises that together undermine educational quality. Teachers' working conditions are fundamentally students' learning conditions. **Recommendation:** The Ethiopian government should endorse the Safe Schools Declaration, ratify ILO Convention 190, and increase education funding to international benchmarks. International partners must bridge the education funding gap, while teachers' unions must be recognized as essential actors in education in emergencies coordination.

Keywords: Ethiopia, teacher precarity, political instability, teachers' union, education in emergencies

1. Introduction

1.1 Background: Ethiopia's Education Paradox

Ethiopia's education system presents a profound paradox. Over the past two decades, the country achieved remarkable success in expanding access to primary education, with gross enrolment rates increasing from less than 50% in 1999 to 87% by 2010 [1]. Government-led initiatives, including school construction in rural areas and the abolition of fees, drove this expansion [2]. Yet this quantitative success masks a catastrophic decline in educational quality. The Grade 12 national examination pass rate, requiring a 50% score for university admission has collapsed from approximately 50% a decade ago to an average of just 3% in recent years [3]. In the 2022/23 academic year alone, 1,328 secondary schools recorded zero passes [3]. The 2025 results show modest improvement to 8.4%, but this remains catastrophically low [4]. Simultaneously, over nine million children remain out of school nationwide, with 4.4 million in Amhara, 3.2 million in Oromia, and 1.2 million in Tigray regions [5]. More than 6,000 schools are closed, and over 10,000 have been damaged or destroyed [6].

1.2 The Central Argument

This article advances three interconnected arguments. First, political instability and teacher economic precarity are mutually reinforcing crises that together undermine educational quality in Ethiopia. Armed conflict has displaced teachers, destroyed schools, and disrupted learning for millions [7], while simultaneously diverting resources and deepening teachers' economic vulnerabilities [8]. Second, teachers occupy a dual position: they are victims of this crisis facing salary delays, payment cuts, and physical insecurity, yet remain central actors in any potential resolution [9]. Third, the Ethiopian Teachers' Association (ETA) represents a critical but under-studied institution navigating this nexus between conflict, precarity, and quality. With over 700,000 members [10], the ETA has evolved beyond traditional collective bargaining to engage in peace advocacy, national dialogue, and campaigns for education funding [11]. Understanding its role illuminates how teachers' unions can function as essential actors in education-in-emergencies contexts.

1.3 Research Questions

This study addresses three research questions: (1) How has political instability affected teachers' working conditions and students' access to education in Ethiopia? (2) What forms does teacher economic precarity take, and how does it impact educational quality? (3) What role has the Ethiopian Teachers' Association played in addressing these challenges?

This study employs qualitative document analysis of multiple data sources: Ministry of Education reports and parliamentary presentations [12]; union publications and statements from the Ethiopian Teachers' Association and Education International [13]; peer-reviewed research on education in conflict-affected Ethiopia [14]; humanitarian agency reports [15]; and Ethiopian media coverage [16]. A case study approach focuses on conflict-affected regions—Tigray, Amhara, Oromia, and newly established regions—where the convergence of instability and educational disruption is most pronounced [17].

This study aims to: (1) document the mechanisms through which conflict and teacher precarity interact to undermine educational quality; (2) illuminate the under-researched role of teachers' unions in crisis contexts; and (3) generate evidence-based recommendations for policy and practice. Its significance lies in addressing a critical gap: while education-in-emergencies research has grown, the agency of teachers' unions in conflict-affected settings remains largely unexplored. By

examining the ETA's multifaceted response from advocacy for the Safe Schools Declaration to engagement in national dialogue, this article contributes to reimagining unions as potential peacebuilding actors rather than merely interest groups [18].

2. Conceptual Framework: Understanding Teacher Precarity and Union Agency in Conflict-Affected Contexts

2.1 Defining Teacher Precarity

Precarity in teaching extends far beyond inadequate salary levels to encompass a multidimensional experience of insecurity that shapes teachers' professional and personal lives [1]. Castro conceptualizes precarity as a process of neoliberal restructuring characterized by three defining features: temporary and fragile employment contracts, incomplete or absent social protection, and unequal power relations that leave teachers vulnerable to exploitation [1]. This aligns with Kalleberg's foundational framework, which identifies precarious work as employment that is uncertain, unpredictable, and risky from the worker's perspective [2]. In conflict-affected contexts like Ethiopia, teacher precarity takes on additional dimensions: payment delays that can extend for months, unpredictable employment due to school closures, lack of social safety nets for displaced educators, and direct physical insecurity from attacks on schools and education personnel [3]. Gebremedhin's study of Tigrayan teachers during the two-year war documents how armed conflict compounds precarity through displacement, separation from families, and the destruction of teachers' homes and livelihoods [3]. The concept of "teacher marginalization" in conflict settings thus captures how educators once viewed as pillars of society, become stigmatized and excluded precisely when their role is most critical [3]. As demonstrated in studies of precarious work, this marginalization is not merely a temporary individual condition but a structural, multilayered phenomenon arising from the intersection of macroeconomic policies, weak state regulation, and political instability [1][2].

2.2 Education in Emergencies (EiE) Framework

The Education in Emergencies framework establishes that international norms protecting the right to education remain fully in force during armed conflict [4]. Under International Humanitarian Law, students, teachers, and education personnel are presumed to be civilians, and schools and other educational facilities are civilian objects entitled to protection from attack [5]. The UN Special Rapporteur on the right to education emphasizes that states must treat attacks on education, protected facilities, and personnel as serious violations of international law requiring accountability, remedy, and reparations [4]. Between 2022 and 2023, attacks on education increased by 20% globally, with over 6,000 reported attacks on schools and universities, students, and educators in 2024 alone [4][6]. The Safe Schools Declaration (SSD), launched in 2015 and now endorsed by 121 states, provides a critical protective framework by strengthening the protection of children, education personnel, and infrastructure, and restricting the use of schools for military purposes during armed conflict [7]. The associated Guidelines for Protecting Schools and Universities from Military Use offer practical measures that parties to conflict can implement to preserve schools' civilian status and minimize harm to students [8]. As the ICRC Commentary clarifies, while these guidelines may recommend measures beyond strict IHL requirements, they remain fully consistent with its provisions and enhance respect for legal obligations [8]. In Ethiopia's context, where armed

conflict has led to widespread school closures, military use of educational facilities, and documented attacks on educators, the SSD framework is urgently relevant [3][6].

2.3 Teachers' Unions as Political Actors

Teachers' unions have undergone a significant evolution from industrial unionism focused narrowly on wages, hours, and working conditions, toward social movement unionism that positions unions as political actors advancing broader social justice agendas [9]. This transformation reflects what Hackner describes as unions increasingly treating classrooms, teachers, and even students as instruments in wider ideological projects, organizing nationally to activate unengaged members around connections between education and social issues [9]. The Chicago Teachers Union exemplifies this model, serving as a national template for converting unions into engines of progressive political organizing through caucuses openly affiliated with social justice movements [9]. In crisis contexts, this evolution positions unions as potential peacebuilders and human rights defenders rather than merely interest groups [10]. The concept of "teacher agency" in crisis settings refers to teachers' capacity to act on their ideas and plans to transform current thinking or practice despite constraints [11]. Chen-Levi et al. conceptualize teacher agency as emerging ecologically from interactions between individuals' capacities and the contexts in which they act [11]. Transformative agency, particularly relevant in conflict settings, involves recognizing problematic situations as worrying or contradictory, making personal investments with uncertain outcomes, and transcending limitations or impasses [11]. For teachers' unions like the Ethiopian Teachers' Association (ETA), this means exercising collective agency not only to advocate for members' welfare but also to engage in national dialogue, demand protection for education, and position themselves as essential actors in peacebuilding processes [3], [10]. As Gebremedhin's research demonstrates, teachers in conflict zones simultaneously experience profound vulnerability while exercising remarkable resilience and collective action to sustain education under impossible conditions [3].

3. Context: Ethiopia's Deepening Education Crisis

3.1 Historical Overview of Education Development

Ethiopia's education system has undergone significant transformation since 1991, with post-Derg governments prioritizing expansion of access through Education Sector Development Programs (ESDPs) and the General Education Quality Improvement Programme (GEQIP) [19]. These initiatives resulted in dramatic enrolment increases, particularly at primary level, through school construction in rural areas and abolition of fees [19]. However, this quantitative expansion masked persistent quality deficits. The Teacher Education System Overhaul (TESO) in the early 2000s represented a groundbreaking shift toward competency-based training and student-centered learning [20]. Yet challenges endure: underperforming candidates enter teacher training institutions, reflecting what critics describe as policies prioritizing "quantity over quality, admitting large numbers of students, irrespective of their academic preparedness" [19]. Inadequate pre-service preparation leaves many teachers ill-equipped for classroom demands, while resource limitations and quality disparities across regions persist, especially in rural areas struggling to retain skilled educators [20].

3.2 The Learning Crisis by Numbers

The scale of Ethiopia's learning crisis is starkly quantifiable through Grade 12 national examination results. Between 2022 and 2025, failure rates consistently exceeded 95%: 3.3% passed in 2022, 3.2% in 2023, 5.4% in 2024, and 8.4% in 2025 [21][22]. The 2025 results reveal that 91.6% of 585,882 examinees failed to achieve the 50% university admission threshold, with only 48,929 students qualifying [22]. Severe disparities exist between streams: 5.2% of social science students passed compared to 11.4% in natural sciences [22]. The public-private divide is equally pronounced, only 5.6% of public school students passed versus 87.1% from government boarding schools [21]. Gender disparity persists, with only 38% of successful candidates being female [21]. Most alarmingly, over 1,200 secondary schools recorded zero passes in 2025; while a mere 50 schools achieved 100% pass rates [22].

Figure 1 presents a comprehensive visualization of Ethiopia's Grade 12 national examination crisis. The top-left panel shows pass rate trends from 2022 to 2025, revealing persistently low performance with modest improvement from 3.3% in 2022 to 8.4% in 2025 [21], [22]. The top-center panel displays the 2025 results: of 585,882 examinees, only 48,929 (8.4%) achieved the 50% university admission threshold, while 536,953 (91.6%) failed [22]. The top-right panel illustrates stream-based disparities: 5.2% of social science students passed compared to 11.4% in natural sciences [22].

The bottom-left panel reveals the stark public-boarding school divides, with only 5.6% of public school students passing versus 87.1% from government boarding schools [21]. The bottom-center panel shows gender disparity, with females comprising only 38% of successful candidates [21]. The bottom-right panel demonstrates school-level extremes: over 1,200 secondary schools recorded zero passes, while merely 50 achieved 100% pass rates [22].

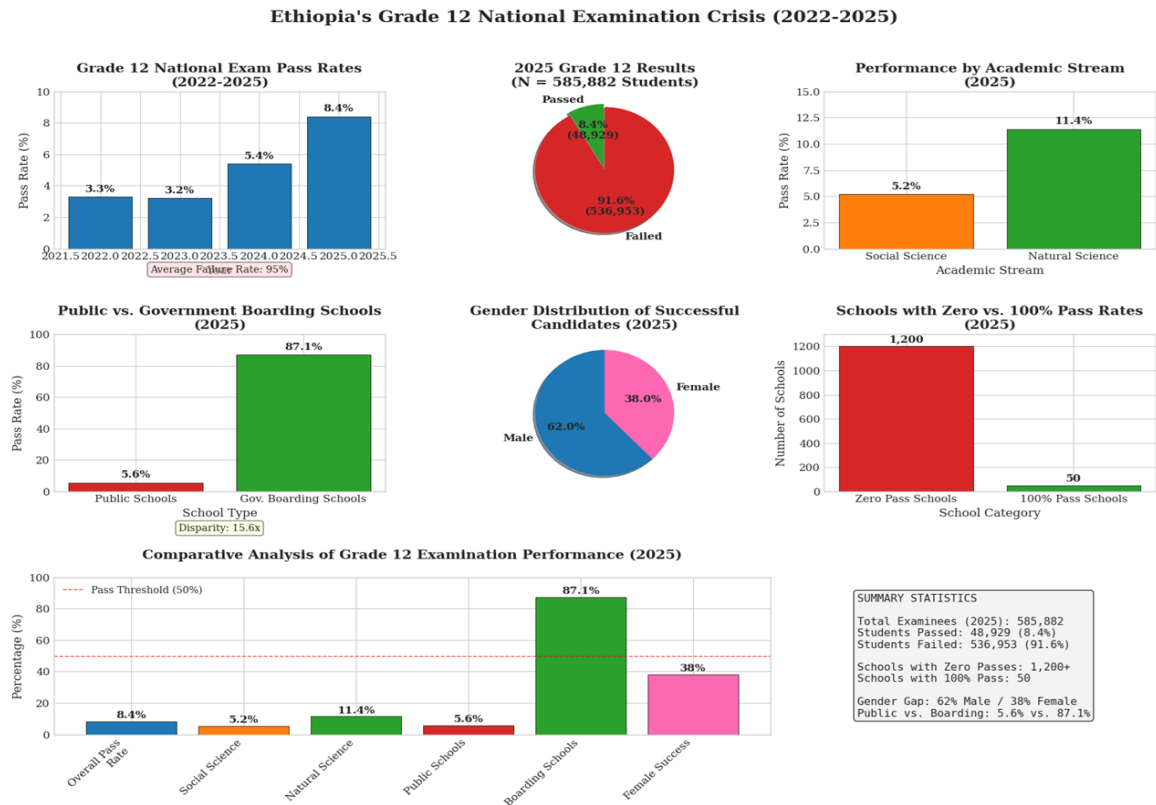


Figure 1. Ethiopia Grade 12 national examination results: (top-left) pass rates 2022-2025; (top-center) 2025 pass/fail; (top-right) stream comparison; (bottom-left) school type disparity; (bottom-center) gender distribution; (bottom-right) zero vs. 100% pass schools.

The longitudinal data reveal a catastrophic learning crisis. Over four years (2022-2025), the average pass rate was merely 5.1%, with 95% of students failing to meet university admission standards [21], [22]. The modest improvement to 8.4% in 2025, while statistically significant, remains educationally meaningless given that 91.6% of students still fail. The 16-fold disparity between public schools (5.6%) and government boarding schools (87.1%) exposes deep systemic inequality, suggesting that quality education is reserved for a select few [21]. Stream-based disparities (natural science outperforming social science by 6.2 percentage points) may reflect differential resource allocation or student selection patterns [22]. Gender disparity, with males comprising 62% of successful candidates, indicates persistent barriers for female students [21]. Most alarming is the school-level data: 1,200+ schools producing zero successful graduates represent complete systemic failure, while merely 50 schools achieving 100% pass rates (0.4% of secondary schools) highlights the concentration of educational excellence in a tiny minority of institutions [22]. These data collectively demonstrate that Ethiopia's education system is failing the vast majority of its students, with quality reserved for an elite minority in privileged institutions.

3.3 Structural Inequalities

Structural inequalities profoundly shape educational outcomes in Ethiopia. The rural-urban divide is stark: Young Lives research demonstrates that early life inequalities, including rural birth, significantly predict lower educational attainment [23]. Students from wealthiest households are nearly four times more likely to complete Grade 12 than poorest peers [23]. Regional disparities are magnified by conflict: in Tigray, only 8% of the younger cohort completed secondary school in 2023, with reopening schools facing "inadequate facilities and poor conditions" [23]. In Amhara, approximately four million students remained without access as of April 2024 due to school closures [23]. Marginalized groups face compounded barriers. Girls with disabilities in post-war Tigray experience "exclusion from education in many ways, which vary from limited participation and learning in schools to complete denial of any type of education," facing infrastructural barriers, discriminatory attitudes, and sexual and gender-based violence [24]. Displaced children, including over 2.3 million internally displaced persons, confront disrupted learning trajectories [25]. The hijab ban in several Axum schools forced 159 Muslim female students from class, exemplifying how religious discrimination further excludes marginalized learners [25]. As Young Lives Director Alula Pankhurst notes, conflict-affected students experience not only educational deprivation but also "depression and anxiety due to the consequences of the conflicts" [23].

4. Political Instability and Its Impact on Education

4.1 Conflict as a Driver of Educational Exclusion

Political instability has emerged as the primary driver of educational exclusion in Ethiopia. As of November 2025, approximately 7.2 million children remain out of school nationwide, with armed conflict accounting for an estimated 70% of these out-of-school children [26]. The physical infrastructure of education has been devastated: over 9,000 schools have been damaged or destroyed by conflict and natural disasters, representing 18% of all schools nationally [26], [27].

More than 6,000 schools remain closed, with many repurposed as military camps or internally displaced persons (IDP) shelters [28], [29]. This systematic destruction of educational infrastructure constitutes a grave violation of children's rights and undermines any prospect of achieving Sustainable Development Goal 4 [26]. The analysis emphasizes that conflict-affected regions require "tailored healing" and substantial investment to rebuild educational systems, noting that community-led initiatives have achieved enrollment boosts of 34.3% in Oromiya and 22.9% in Tigray despite ongoing instability [40].

4.2 Regional Case Studies

4.2.1 Amhara Region

The Amhara region has experienced the most severe educational disruption nationally. Over 4.5 million children have missed two consecutive school years, with 42% of the school-aged population, more than 3 million children, out of school during the 2025/26 academic year [30], [31]. Secondary school access is particularly constrained, with 64% of students having no access to secondary education [31]. The conflict has displaced over 23,000 teachers who have not returned to work, while approximately 3,500 primary schools and 225 secondary schools remain shuttered, many serving as military camps for armed actors [29][32]. The Amhara region recorded the lowest national examination performance in 2024, as only half of eligible students could sit for exams due to insecurity [32].

4.2.2 Tigray Region

The two-year war (2020-2022) devastated Tigray's education infrastructure. Nearly 1.2 million children, 46% of the region's school-age population, remain out of school, with 220 schools in Western Tigray alone ceasing operations [33]. The conflict cost the region approximately 30% of its teachers (about 14,000 educators) through death, displacement, and attrition [33]. Teachers who remain face profound psychological distress, having been separated from families and witnessed the destruction of their schools and communities [34]. As documented by Gebremedhin, teachers "once viewed as pillars of society" have become marginalized and stigmatized, their professional identity shattered by war [34]. The regional government acknowledges that "academic potential has been compromised" and the teaching environment remains unconducive [33]. Mathematical modeling of Ethiopia's divided society provides theoretical grounding for understanding how prolonged conflict creates systemic educational fractures that resist simple policy interventions [41].

4.2.3 Oromia Region

In Western Oromia, armed conflict has forced close to 250,000 children out of school [27]. Displaced children like 11-year-old Dibora, who fled ethnic conflict to Gambella, face overcrowded classrooms with over 80 students per teacher, no desks, and insufficient textbooks [35]. The convergence of conflict and displacement has created generational educational loss. Harmonizing heritage and innovation suggests that culturally responsive approaches, incorporating local values and community engagement, may offer pathways to educational resilience even in conflict-affected areas [42].

4.2.4 Newly Established Regions

In South Ethiopia, Central Ethiopia, and Southwest Ethiopia, regions established following administrative restructuring, teachers face severe economic precarity. Many have experienced

salary cuts, delayed payments, and unpaid wages, with some receiving as little as 15% of regular salaries [36]. Teachers have been forced into manual labor, shoe shining, cargo handling to survive, while others have been detained for peacefully advocating salary payments [36][37]. The study on quality education challenges in Dire Dawa found that 43% of surveyed teachers had not received in-service training in the preceding two years, and 91.9% identified cheating as a critical problem undermining quality, factors exacerbated by the instability and economic precarity documented in newly established regions [43].

4.3. National and Regional Educational Exclusion

Figure 2 presents a comprehensive visualization of political instability's impact on education across Ethiopia's conflict-affected regions. The top-left panel displays national educational exclusion: 7.2 million children remain out of school nationwide, with 5.04 million (70%) directly attributable to armed conflict [26]. Over 9,000 schools have been damaged or destroyed, representing 18% of all schools nationally, while more than 6,000 schools remain closed, many repurposed as military camps [26], [27]. The top-center1 panel shows out-of-school children by region: Amhara leads with 4.5 million, followed by Oromia (3.2 million), Tigray (1.2 million), and other regions (1.0 million) [30], [33].

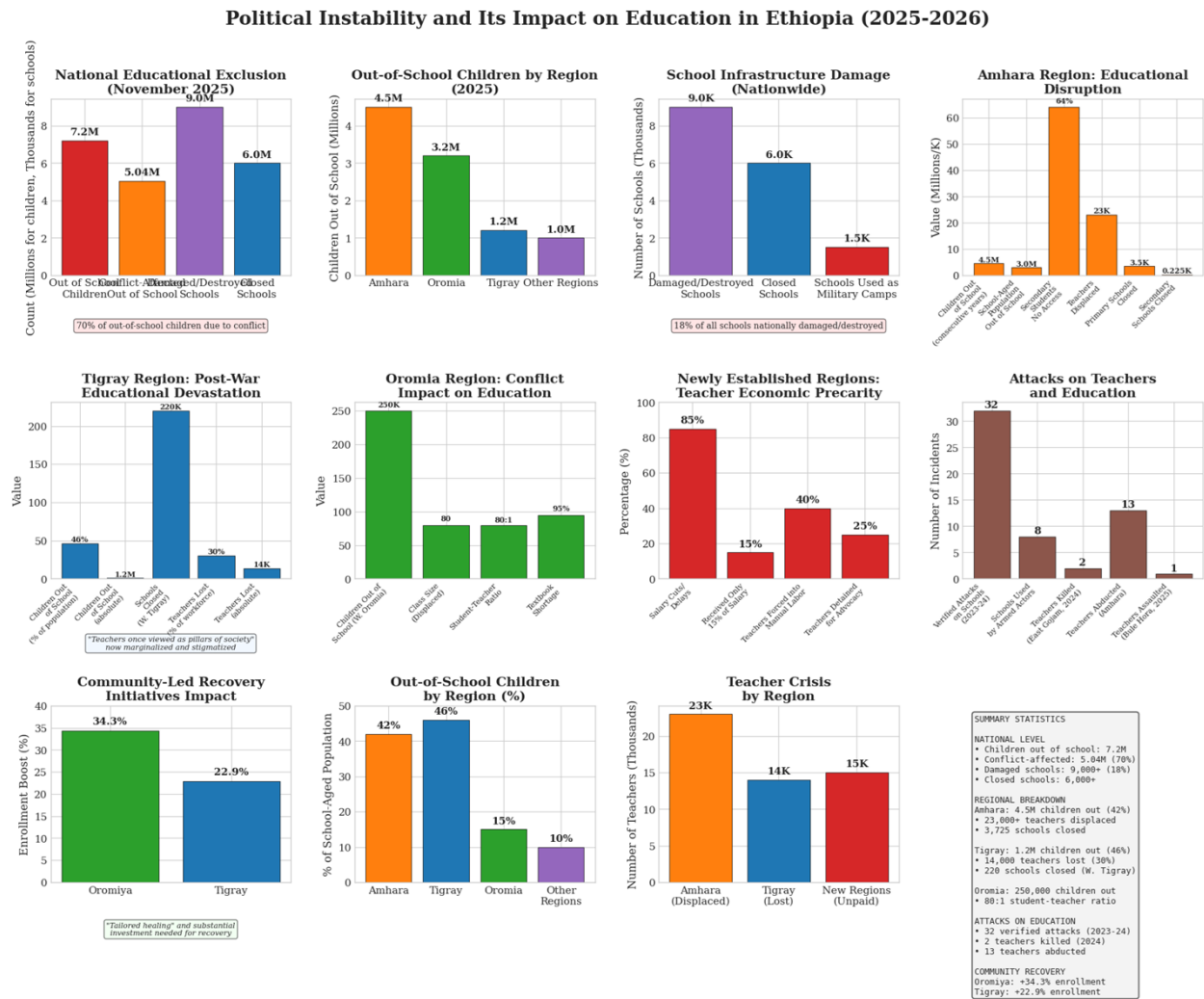


Figure 2. Political instability and educational impact: (top row) national exclusion, regional out-of-school children, infrastructure damage, Amhara disruption; (middle row) Tigray devastation,

Oromia impact, teacher precarity, attacks on education; (bottom row) community recovery, regional percentages, teacher crisis.

The top-center2 panel illustrates school infrastructure damage: 9,000 damaged schools, 6,000 closed facilities, and numerous schools converted to military use [28], [29]. The top-right panel details Amhara's educational disruption: 4.5 million children missing consecutive years, 42% of school-aged population out, 64% of secondary students without access, and 23,000 displaced teachers [31], [32].

4.4. Regional Case Studies and Attacks on Education

The middle-left panel reveals Tigray's post-war devastation: 1.2 million children out of school (46% of school-aged population), 220 schools closed in Western Tigray alone, and 14,000 teachers lost, 30% of the regional teaching workforce [33], [34]. Gebremedhin documents how teachers "once viewed as pillars of society" have become marginalized and stigmatized [34]. The middle-center1 panel shows Oromia's conflict impact: 250,000 children out of school in Western Oromia, with displaced children facing overcrowded classrooms of 80+ students per teacher and severe textbook shortages [27], [35].

The middle-center2 panel illustrates teacher economic precarity in newly established regions: 85% experience salary cuts or delays, with some receiving as little as 15% of regular salaries, forcing teachers into manual labor such as shoe shining and cargo handling to survive [36], [37]. The middle-right panel documents attacks on education: 32 verified attacks on schools (2023-24), eight instances of schools used by armed actors, two teachers killed in East Gojam (2024), 13 teachers abducted in Amhara, and one teacher publicly assaulted in Bule Hora (2025) [26], [32], [38].

4.6. Recovery and Regional Disparities

The bottom-left panel demonstrates community-led recovery impact: Oromiya achieved 34.3% enrollment boost through community initiatives, while Tigray attained 22.9% despite ongoing instability, confirming that "tailored healing" and substantial investment can rebuild educational systems [40]. The bottom-center panel shows out-of-school percentages by region: Tigray (46%), Amhara (42%), Oromia (15%), and other regions (10%), highlighting the disproportionate impact on northern conflict zones [31], [33]. The bottom-right panel illustrates the teacher crisis: 23,000 displaced teachers in Amhara, 14,000 lost in Tigray, and thousands unpaid or detained in newly established regions [32], [36].

4.7. Regional Comparison and Recovery Initiatives

Figure 3 presents a comparative analysis of educational impact across Ethiopia's conflict-affected regions. The top-left panel shows out-of-school children by region: Amhara leads with 4.5 million, followed by Tigray (1.2 million), Oromia (0.35 million), and other regions (0.3 million) [30], [33]. The top-center panel illustrates school infrastructure damage by region: Amhara suffered 3,725 damaged or closed schools, followed by other regions (3,975), Oromia (800), and Tigray (500) [26], [29]. The top-right panel displays the teacher crisis: Amhara lost 23,000 teachers to displacement, Tigray lost 14,000 (30% of workforce), and newly established regions face widespread unpaid salaries [32], [34], [36].

Regional Analysis: Political Instability and Educational Impact in Ethiopia

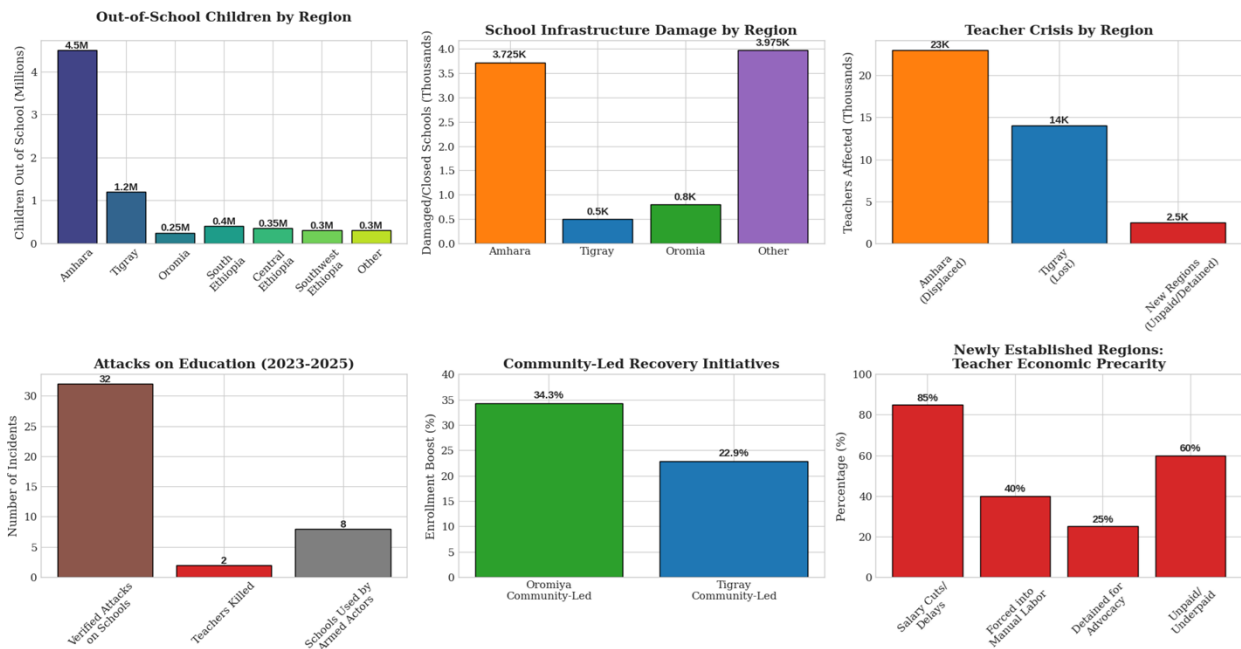


Figure 3. Regional comparison of educational impact: (top row) out-of-school children, school damage, teacher crisis; (bottom row) attacks on education, community recovery, teacher economic precarity.

The bottom-left panel documents attacks on education: 32 verified attacks nationally, with Amhara experiencing the highest concentration including 13 teacher abductions and two killings [26], [32]. The bottom-center panel shows community-led recovery impact: Oromiya achieved 34.3% enrollment boost through community initiatives, while Tigray attained 22.9% despite ongoing instability [40]. The bottom-right panel illustrates teacher economic precarity in newly established regions: 85% experience salary cuts or delays, 60% face underpayment, and 40% are forced into manual labor to survive [36], [37].

4.8. Attacks on Teachers and Education

Attacks on education personnel have become systematic. Between 2023 and 2024, the United Nations verified 32 attacks against schools, including eight instances of schools used by armed actors [26]. In September 2025, a teacher in Bule Hora was stripped and publicly assaulted over alleged political affiliations [26], [38]. In 2024, two teachers were killed in East Gojam, Amhara region, after being questioned "Why are you teaching?" by armed militants [32][39]. Teachers in newly established regions have been detained for advocating salary payments, while in Amhara, 13 teachers were abducted in North Gojjam Zone alone [32], [36]. These attacks create a climate of terror that extends beyond individual victims to entire communities, signaling that education itself is a target [26][34]. The research on teacher misconceptions revealed significant disparities in teacher preparedness, with MSc holders (average 75%) outperforming BSc holders (average 62%), suggesting that the loss of experienced teachers through conflict-induced displacement and attacks disproportionately erodes educational quality [44]. The receptor-oriented approach proposed for the

overcoming educational challenges emphasizes the need for context-sensitive interventions that address the specific vulnerabilities of teachers in conflict zones [45].

6. Teacher Economic Precarity: Forms, Causes, and Consequences

6.1 The Nature of Teacher Precarity in Ethiopia

6.1.1 Inadequate Compensation

Teacher economic precarity in Ethiopia is fundamentally rooted in systemic underfunding. African governments invest an average of only 3.8% of GDP in education, substantially below the internationally recommended 6% benchmark [46]. Ethiopia's education spending has declined dramatically in real terms: from 110 billion birr (2019/20) to 72 billion birr (2023/24), representing a 34.5% reduction [47]. Per-student expenditure stands 78.6% below the Sub-Saharan Africa average, while real education spending declined 23% between 2017/18 and 2021/22 despite nominal increases [37][48]. This disinvestment directly undermines teacher welfare and, consequently, educational quality.

6.1.2 Payment Irregularities

Beyond inadequate compensation, teachers face systematic payment irregularities. In newly established regions, South Ethiopia, Central Ethiopia, and Southwest Ethiopia, teachers have remained unpaid since August 2023, with some receiving as little as 15% of their regular salaries [36], [49]. As of October 2024, July 2024 payments remained outstanding in multiple districts, forcing teachers into impossible financial circumstances [36]. The analysis emphasizes that such payment disruptions constitute "economic violence" against educators, systematically undermining their capacity to fulfill professional responsibilities [40].

6.1.3 Forced Displacement and Livelihood Destruction

Armed conflict has precipitated massive teacher displacement. Thousands of teachers displaced from Tigray to Addis Ababa remain unable to return to their schools, while teachers' houses in Amhara border areas have been systematically destroyed [3][34]. This destruction of physical and professional assets compounds economic precarity with existential insecurity.

6.2 Consequences for Teachers

6.2.1 Physical and Material Impacts

The material consequences of teacher precarity are severe. ActionAid research documents that 75% of surveyed Ethiopian educators have reduced their families' food intake due to falling earnings [37]. Teachers report inability to provide basic sustenance for their children, with many forced into alternative low-wage employment, shoe shining, cargo handling, and daily labor—to survive [36], [37]. As one displaced Tigrayan teacher recounted, "I never imagined I would beg for food. But here I am, a teacher, unable to feed my own children" [34].

6.2.2 Psychological and Social Impacts

The psychological toll is equally devastating. Teachers experience profound psychological distress, including fears of familial breakdown and loss of professional identity [34]. Social interactions diminish as teachers withdraw from community roles they once filled, unable to participate in traditional reciprocal obligations [3]. Gebremedhin documents how teachers "once viewed as pillars of society" have become marginalized and stigmatized, their professional dignity systematically

eroded by circumstances beyond their control [34]. Goshu's 2024 research on teacher misconceptions reveals that such psychological distress directly correlates with diminished classroom effectiveness, as teachers preoccupied with survival cannot invest fully in pedagogical preparation [44].

6.3 Consequences for Educational Quality

6.3.1 Teacher Exodus

The most alarming consequence is accelerating teacher attrition. ActionAid research reveals that 91% of Ethiopian teachers express intentions to leave the profession, the highest rate among all countries surveyed [37]. In the 2025/26 academic year alone, over 1,000 teachers resigned in three zones of the Amhara Region, with many migrating to Arab states for better pay [32]. This exodus represents not merely statistical loss but the departure of experienced educators whose institutional knowledge cannot be replaced.

6.3.2 Impact on Teaching and Learning

ETA President Yohannes Benti's formulation is foundational: "Teachers' working conditions are students' learning conditions" [13]. Demoralized teachers preoccupied with economic survival cannot deliver quality instruction. The Policy Studies Institute (PSI) research confirms that low job satisfaction among educators directly links to poor student outcomes, including the catastrophic national exam failure rates [50]. When teachers cannot afford classroom materials or transportation to school, learning suffers irreparably.

6.3.3 Teacher Quality Challenges

The crisis is compounded by pre-existing teacher quality challenges. Underperforming candidates are systematically admitted to teacher training institutions, reflecting policies prioritizing "quantity over quality" [19]. Inadequate pre-service preparation leaves many teachers ill-equipped for classroom demands. Licensing exam results reveal profound content knowledge deficits among practicing teachers [44]. Most damningly, ActionAid research documents that 96% of Ethiopian teachers received no recent professional training, leaving them without support to address evolving pedagogical challenges [37]. The study in Dire Dawa found significant disparities in teacher preparedness, with MSc holders (average 75% on content assessments) substantially outperforming BSc holders (average 62%), yet such qualified teachers are precisely those most likely to emigrate [44]. This creates a vicious cycle: economic precarity drives out qualified teachers, leaving students with less prepared educators, further depressing learning outcomes and reinforcing the crisis.

7. The Ethiopian Teachers' Association (ETA): Responding to Crisis

7.1 Overview of ETA

The Ethiopian Teachers' Association (ETA), founded in February 1949 by 32 teachers from Minilik Senior Secondary School, stands as Ethiopia's oldest and largest educators' organization [1]. While historical membership figures cite 450,000, contemporary estimates approach 700,000 members, unified under the principle that "The Ethiopian Teachers' Association unifies all teachers and education personnel in Ethiopia" [1][5]. The ETA is affiliated with Education International (EI), the global federation of education unions, and is led by President Yohannes Benti Chekors (PhD), who also serves on the EI Executive Board [1][2][3]. The executive committee includes Shimelis

Abebe, Tilahun Tarekegn, Destaye Tadesse, and Tarekegn Haile [1]. The ETA maintains partnerships with UNESCO, UNICEF, ILO, and teacher organizations across Europe [5].

7.2 Advocacy for Teacher Welfare

7.2.1 "Go Public! Fund Education" Campaign

In June 2024, ETA launched the Education International "Go Public! Fund Education" campaign in conjunction with its 11th Quality Education Conference [2][6]. The campaign's core objective is urging the Ethiopian government to meet international benchmarks of 6% of GDP and 20% of national budgets for education [2][6]. President Benti emphasized the global movement: "We are mobilizing to fully fund public education systems and resist budget cuts, austerity, and privatization" [2]. The campaign employed evidence-based advocacy, commissioning budget analysis from Addis Ababa University experts, and mounted a comprehensive media campaign across television, radio, and print outlets including the Ethiopian Herald and The Reporter [2][10]. Training sessions equipped 30 union leaders with communication and campaign strategies [2][6].

7.2.2 Addressing Economic Precarity

ETA has directly confronted teacher economic precarity by requesting government payment of salaries for displaced Tigrayan teachers and providing financial solidarity support when government mechanisms failed [3]. The union has supported teachers whose houses were destroyed in conflict zones, offering material assistance to members facing catastrophic loss [3].

7.3 Protection of Education in Conflict

7.3.1 Condemning Attacks on Education

During the Tigray war (November 2020-November 2022), ETA publicly condemned the damage and disruption inflicted on students, teachers, and the education system [3][7]. The union called on relevant public authorities to halt armed conflict immediately and issued press releases to local media requesting parties to negotiate [3]. ETA reported violations to Education International's Africa regional committee, ensuring international visibility of attacks on education [3].

7.3.2 Campaign for Safe Schools Declaration

In October 2023, ETA organized a World Teachers' Day conference in collaboration with Jigjiga University, bringing together federal and state government officials [3], [7]. President Benti presented the Safe Schools Declaration (SSD), an inter-governmental political commitment protecting students, teachers, schools, and universities from armed conflict effects, and called for Ethiopian government endorsement [3], [7]. Noting that 118 countries had endorsed the SSD by May 2023, Benti argued this was "a crucial step, especially since the country has had to suffer the devastating impact of the Tigray War on education" [3], [7].

7.3.3 Advocacy for ILO Convention 190

ETA Deputy General Secretary presented International Labour Organization Convention 190 (C190) on eliminating violence and harassment in the world of work at the World Teachers' Day conference [3], [7]. ETA strongly advocates for government ratification of this instrument, which defines violence and harassment as unacceptable behaviors causing physical, psychological, sexual, or economic harm [3], [7]. Ratifying governments must adopt legislative and policy measures to prevent, expose, and remedy gender-based violence and harassment [3], [7].

7.4 Engagement in National Dialogue

7.4.1 Memorandum with National Dialogue Commission

ETA signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the Ethiopian National Dialogue Commission (ENDC), formalizing commitment to mobilize the education community for inclusive national dialogue on Ethiopia's challenges [3]. This engagement positions teachers as essential contributors to peace processes.

7.4.2 Framing Education as Peacebuilding

President Benti articulates education's transformative potential: "Investing in education is the best option to bring peace" [3]. He emphasizes that quality education teaches tolerance, coexistence, and peace, serving as the "best remedy to bring peace" to divided societies [3], [7]. This framing aligns with the mathematical modeling of Ethiopia's divided society, which demonstrates how educational investment can mitigate political polarization [41].

7.5 Professional Leadership on Quality

7.5.1 Annual Quality Education Conferences

ETA's 11th International Annual Quality Education Conference (June 2024), themed "Go Public Fund Education," convened over 200 participants including government officials, EI Africa Director Dennis Sinyolo, and development partners [2]. Research presentations addressed teacher training effectiveness, the plight of the teaching profession, and public spending on education [2].

7.5.2 National University Teachers' Forum

The 2nd National University Teachers' Forum (October 2025), themed "We Work for University Education Quality," addressed increasing workloads, rising cost of living, and teacher shortages in higher education [13]. The research on teacher quality informed discussions on professional development needs [43], [44].

7.5.3 23rd General Assembly (October 2025)

ETA's 23rd General Assembly called for implementing UN High Level Panel Recommendations on the teaching profession, advocating that "teaching should be attractive and first choice profession" through decent salaries, good working conditions, and professional trust [13]. President urged unity: "Organize and mobilize for a stronger ETA and stronger Ethiopian education system" [13].

7.6 Limitations and Challenges

Despite its advocacy, ETA faces significant constraints. Government responsiveness to campaign demands remains limited [3]. Historical tensions persist: past ILO reports documented government interference, including 2005 security forces occupying ETA headquarters for two weeks, detaining six members, and the 2007 Federal High Court ruling dissolving the original ETA [1], [5]. More than 20 teachers have been dismissed for alleged opposition political affiliations [1], [5]. Resource constraints limit ETA's capacity to provide comprehensive support to all affected members, particularly given the scale of displacement and economic precarity [3]. The government-created splinter group, "New ETA," continues to receive redirected union dues, undermining the original organization's financial base [1], [5]. These limitations constrain ETA's ability to fully realize its protective and advocacy missions.

8. Synthesis: The ETA's Evolving Role – From Advocate to Peacebuilder?

8.1 The Nexus of Precarity, Instability, and Union Agency

The Ethiopian education crisis reveals the inextricable linkage between teacher economic precarity and political instability. Armed conflict drives teacher displacement, destroys schools, and disrupts salary payments, while simultaneously deepening teachers' economic vulnerabilities [3], [34]. This precarity, in turn, undermines teacher morale and classroom effectiveness, creating a self-reinforcing cycle of educational decline [37], [50]. Teachers occupy a dual position as both victims of this crisis and essential actors in its resolution, yet their agency has been systematically constrained by the very conditions they seek to overcome [34], [40].

8.2 The ETA's Multidimensional Response

The Ethiopian Teachers' Association has mounted a multidimensional response addressing this complex nexus. In its traditional union role, ETA advocates for improved salaries and working conditions through collective bargaining and the "Go Public! Fund Education" campaign [2], [6]. Critically, however, ETA has expanded beyond industrial unionism to embrace protection, peace advocacy, and national dialogue engagement [3], [7]. The union's condemnation of attacks on education, campaign for Safe Schools Declaration endorsement, and advocacy for ILO Convention 190 ratification demonstrate evolution toward human rights defense [3], [7]. Through international solidarity mechanisms—reporting violations to Education International and securing resolutions, ETA has amplified Ethiopian teachers' voices globally [3], [13].

8.3 Toward a New Model of Unionism in Crisis Contexts

ETA's experience suggests the emergence of a new model of unionism in crisis-affected contexts. Beyond traditional collective bargaining, unions must function as human rights defenders and essential actors in education in emergencies [3], [11]. The analysis emphasizes that such evolution requires unions to position themselves as peacebuilding actors capable of engaging in national dialogue and reconciliation processes [40]. Yet this model demands recognition from humanitarian coordination mechanisms, which have historically excluded teachers' unions from education in emergencies planning and response [26], [40]. The ETA's engagement with the Ethiopian National Dialogue Commission represents a promising step toward this recognition [3]. As President articulates, quality education itself constitutes the "best remedy to bring peace," positioning teachers and their unions as indispensable to both educational recovery and broader societal reconciliation [3], [7].

9. Implications for Policy and Practice

9.1 For the Ethiopian Government

The Ethiopian government must take urgent action to address the education crisis. First, endorse the Safe Schools Declaration to protect students, teachers, and schools from attack during armed conflict [3], [7]. Second, ratify ILO Convention 190 to eliminate violence and harassment in the workplace, including gender-based violence affecting educators [3], [7]. Third, increase education funding to meet international benchmarks of 6% of GDP and 20% of national budgets [2], [6], [46]. Currently, African governments invest only 3.8% of GDP on average [2], [6]. Fourth, ensure timely salary payments, particularly in newly established regions where teachers have gone unpaid for

extended periods [36], [49]. Fifth, address teacher shortages: UNESCO projections indicate Sub-Saharan Africa needs 15 million additional teachers by 2030 to achieve SDG 4 [2], [6], [10].

9.2 For the ETA

The Ethiopian Teachers' Association should continue evidence-based advocacy, building on its "Go Public! Fund Education" campaign [2], [6]. Strengthen grassroots mobilization in conflict-affected regions including Amhara, Tigray, and Oromia [3], [7]. The document and report attacks on education to national and international bodies, including Education International [3], [13]. Build strategic alliances with humanitarian actors including UNICEF, OCHA, and local NGOs operating in insecure areas [3], [4].

9.3 For International Partners

International partners must bridge the education funding gap: only 27% of the USD 98 million humanitarian appeal for education was funded [26]. Support local NGOs working in conflict-affected areas, such as Innovative Humanitarian Services (IHS) in Tigray [4]. Fund programs aligned with the Safe Schools Declaration to ensure education continues during emergencies [26]. Invest in climate-resilient, inclusive education infrastructure that serves both displaced and host communities [7], [26]. Prioritize girls' education and protection, as girls with disabilities in post-war Tigray face compounded barriers to access [24], [8].

10. Conclusion

10.1 Summary of Findings

This article has demonstrated that political instability and teacher economic precarity are mutually reinforcing crises that together undermine educational quality in Ethiopia. Armed conflict has driven millions of children from school, destroyed educational infrastructure, and devastated teachers' lives through displacement, physical attacks, and psychological trauma. Simultaneously, teacher economic precarity has reached crisis levels: inadequate compensation, systematic payment delays, and forced displacement have driven a mass exodus from the profession, with over 90% of teachers expressing intentions to leave. The Ethiopian Teachers' Association has responded across multiple fronts, advocacy for increased funding, protection of education in conflict, engagement in national dialogue, and professional leadership on quality. The evidence confirms ETA President Yohannes Benti's foundational insight: teachers' working conditions are indeed students' learning conditions.

10.2 Contribution to Knowledge

This study makes three contributions to the literature. First, it illuminates the under-studied role of teachers' unions in conflict-affected contexts, demonstrating how unions evolve from traditional collective bargaining to human rights defense and peacebuilding. Second, it connects teacher precarity literature with the education in emergencies framework, revealing how economic vulnerability and physical insecurity interact to compound educational exclusion. Third, it provides empirical evidence from Ethiopia's ongoing crisis, documenting the mechanisms through which conflict and precarity undermine educational quality at national and regional levels.

10.3 The Way Forward

The crisis, while devastating, also presents opportunity for transformation. Inclusive policy dialogue that centers teachers' voices and experiences is essential for developing contextually appropriate solutions. Teachers and their unions must be central to these processes—not merely as implementers of externally designed reforms but as co-architects of educational recovery. As ETA President powerfully articulated, "even though the declining quality of education in our country requires the contribution of various stakeholders, teachers carry the greatest responsibility, from proposing solutions to implementing corrective actions." Realizing this vision requires commitment from government, international partners, and teachers themselves to rebuild an education system worthy of Ethiopia's children.

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